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Interview with Don Roberts
with Rae Swanson and Frank Baumgardner
Feb. 4, 2010

FB: Introduction, "We're going to ask Don about cooperatives and labor and the apple industry and WWII on through the 1980's.

DR: The early 80s then the apple business started taking a dive.

FB: The article I read in from 1982 the problem was it cost $60 to 80 to grow a ton of apples and market price was $40. The economics just didn't work anymore. So one by one even the bigger companies that had packing houses or canning it just became less and less profitable.

DR: The packing house saved me in the early 80s because the coops built a new plant at Molino Corners (Occidental Rd and Hy 116) and they had to do that because the EPA said we were putting out too much sulfur dioxide in the dryers and do they said you've got to change and use a different system of drying apples which they did do. Instead of burning sulfur like they used to they sprayed on sulfur dioxide to keep em from turning brown. They spent about $20 million dollars building that new plant, but that's when the interest rates were approaching ~~the~~ 20~~s~~ percent. Because of the high interest rate and only a certain amount of return. The growers at the cannery, even good fruit we got $13 to 15 a ton and it cost $16 to harvest not counting the spray materials, fertilizer, diesel. What helped me I had a pretty good percentage of fresh fruit go through the packing house at SAGU. They were up there at Molino Corners also, had a packing house there, along with the cannery on the same property.

FB: Where is that now?

DR: At Occidental Rd and 116. I was making $250 a ton. We had a little profit where some people went...I was able to survive because of the packing house, the fresh market. It was a matter of time, it got out of balance. Then Vacu Dry bought it, they ran it for 4 years then they decided it wasn't profitable, they had competition from the Northwest but from China. China planted over a million acres of apples. A lot of that was coming in concentrate. We couldn't even make concentrate, every gallon we produced we lost money because it was coming in so cheap from foreign countries. Then the fresh market also not only from the Northwest but it started coming from Chile, Australia, New Zealand. Even some dried apples came from Europe. So that killed the dryers, the juice market and that's why we're looking at grapes today. And its kinda shaky now too.

FB: Do you remember roughly like say when you were a kid on through what were the glut years, when there were so many apples that the price was dropped.

DR: After the war, there were about 11,000 acres of apples. They weren't all Gravensteins, there were Rome Beautys, Jonathans, Red and Golden Delicious, primarily Gravenstein, But

Gravenstein needed a pollinizer so about a third of the fruit was a pollinizer, you had to have a different apple to pollinize.

RS: But there was a market?

DR: There was a market but then after the war some growers figured this was a bonanza, I'm going to buy more land, they did that then the price fell 50 percent. And they had 50 to 100 acres and they had to make payments on it. The heydays were over after the war. So then from there up to 1970 they averaged $125 a ton.
Where before they were getting $200-$250 so it went down about half and your expenses going up, labor started going up. Taxes, fuel. Gasoline one time was 17 cents a gallon, diesel I paid 13 cents at one time. But the price of fruit went down you had to be efficient. I made a lot of my own machinery. You had to do that, because the price per ton was down dramatically so you had to be big or look for another job. Bill Braga, was a small grower on Ferguson Rd. He brought his apples to Barlow. He drove school bus for many years for Analy. To help bring in another income and other growers did something similar to that too. Did other jobs.

FB: That's a tried and true tradition, still I guess. I'm trying to think of changes that happened what about Vietnam or during Korea were there any changes, did you get better prices then?

DR: There could have been some but I'd say it stabilized. It might have gone up a percentage but not a lot. Those war years, it wasn't huge. Dried apples went up a little bit, maybe apple sauce and juice might have gone up a little bit, maybe 10 percent, but it wasn't a huge theater like WWII. It probably had some effect on it.

RS: Would you clear this up, SAGU and Coop were they in competition with each other.

DR: Sebastopol Coop Cannery had a dryer down here where the storage place is behind McDonalds (Southpoint) they also had a cannery downtown by Barlow, just before Barlow. Then we had a dryer (we because I was a member there) in Graton, then they had a dryer at Molino Corners where the big plant is now. Mostly ground windfalls. The main cannery was downtown. They consolidated and made everything at Molino that's when they closed this plant downtown.
About the late 1970s, 1978. Because we got caught in that high interest rate but the government said you got to do something, EPA/Air Quality Control Board. Took about 2 years to build. Tore down the dryer up there and cleared the land and do a lot of reconstruction cause it was kinda marshy up there. They had to go down 15 feet, $18 to $20 million for that plant. We also got fruit from Gridley and Boonville, there was other fruit around from Northern California, even from apple hill off Hy. 50. Another big grower on Hy. 41 around Los Banos area, in the foothills, Paso Robles, several thousand acres, he brought fruit up here too so there was a lot of fruit coming in but the interest rate screwed everything up but there were tremendous payments to be made to Bank of America, they financed it, a loan. It just wasn't profitable anymore.

RS: So you were involved in the Coop. Were you ~~were~~ also involved in SAGU?

DR: I was chairman of the Board there for a number of years and on the board of the Coop cannery too.

RS: So they weren't in competition.?

DR: No, one of them was fresh fruit and the other was for processing.All the culls, apples that didn't make quality for fresh fruit were forklifted to the cannery, it was an ideal setup really. It came in one door and went out the other. Plus we leased the packing house, leased the cold storage room from the cannery so we could pack it, put it in cold storage and wait to be trucked out.

FB: So SAGU was fresh,

DR: SAGU was fresh, Sebastopol Apple Growers United.

FB: Just to back up, you said about the number of varieties you used to have. I've got a financial report they did in 1925 in the Library's History Annex and they must have had 50 different varieties. And Gravenstein was 2/3s of it. That year they shipped 100,000 boxes, almost 98,000 and 2/3s was Gravs.

DR: Oh yeah, May apples and June apples all sorts. But what Gravs really needed was a pollinizer that bloomed the same time as the Gravenstein and like a Golden Delicious blooms later and Gravs have what they call a King bloom, the first bloom, that's the one you want to pollinize if possible, then you have four or five others that come out of this bud which is a later bloom and the later varieties will pollinize those. They never make as big an apple, the King bloom is the best. Just like a berry, the first are the best, the others come out later, they're ok.

RS: Is that what we call the late Gravs?

DR: They're the Gravensteins, but when the blooms comes out there's one right in the center that comes out first then there's four or five come out from that bud also. The King bloom is the one that comes up in the center. That makes the best apple, its got a longer time to mature and everything and generally matures a little earlier than the rest of them because the other four or five are a bit later and pollinated by a different variety and don't make quite as good an apple. They used to pick Gravenstein's on July 4th. Its unheard of today, generally in August now. The soil is,..because its been farmed for 100 years. There's certain micro nutrients in there that are probably gone because it was virgin land..

RS: Did you want to ask about strikes?

FB: Oh yeah, strikes, labor.

DR: They had some of those, that was in the 50s. Probably while I was in high school, 53 or 54 in there. I worked up after school, at the cannery about 4 to 8 (pm) just on peelers and cleaning up because they had strikes so the labor force was gone. You had some scabs, people said I have to work and would come in, but it was tough.

FB: What union was it? Was it Teamsters?

DR: It was Teamsters.

RS: And was it for a period of one year?

DR: Seemed like it went longer than a year. I'm guessing 1954 somewhere in there.

FB: There seems to have been times but most people think the biggest time was during the Depression because those were the ones with the biggest strikes back East. AFL-CIO and the steel industry and autos and that was the bitterest rights and I don't imagine out here...

DR: There was something earlier than that too, something to do with Teamsters as far as hauling fruit, transporting fruit, these plant were not unionized then when they became unionized that's when you had strikes. Right around the 40s/50s area. after the war. The Teamsters came in and got enough people to authorize a union and so they had to go union and after awhile, just a few years they wanted so much money an hour and all this stuff and that's when they said we can't afford that and that's when the strike came.

FB: I read about earlier, during the 20s, where they had some KKK action or that would have been before you...

DR: I don't know there was much of that, there was some strange things going on up here. I think that was before the war, in the mid 30's some unionizing going on to transport fruit to San Francisco or to a rail head it had to go on certain union trucks, something like that. My uncle was driving truck for fresh market for the packing house and he drove truck down to San Francisco. He had to have a shotgun a guy riding shotgun with him. It was serious business. That was in the 30s after the Depression.

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FB: Did you ever hear that Harry Bridges was involved in that?

DR: I'm sure he was but I can't say for sure.
It was down and dirty but that was prior to me being born. Earlier than that they had an outbreak of hoof and mouth disease in the dairies. So all the trucks heading south through Marin County had to go through a wash, Like through an ag station coming into California. And they'd come along side of you and threaten you, and they call those the good ole days.

RS: Can I go back to your advisory board so this was SAGU? Or was it..

DR: it was everything it was the fresh market and the processed.

RS: it was a statewide organization?

DR: Yeah statewide, some of these are from down south, Watsonville, Templeton.

RS: So district two was up here?

DR: This was district two. District one was Archie Schinal (spelling?) He was a pretty good sized grower in Boonville. The rest of these were growers on the committee.

RS: So it's like a board.

DR: It was to advertise and promote California apples and all we were all assessed I think it was $5 a ton or something. That all went in to advertisements. We got nothing on the board, we were all volunteers.

RS: And that's what these people are. Were you appointed or did you volunteer.

DR: We were voted in from this area. If you were a member of the coop cannery or Barlow. They wanted to get apple growers from different areas so Barlow. I don't know if Hallberg had anybody on there or not but it was mainly the cannery or packing house plus Barlow. Reid, Starkey, Lee Arnold, Martinelli, Dan Baldi,
Bill Marshall.

RS: (asks John Fore) Richard Starkey was your father in law?

JF: No that's a son, Donna's brother. William Starkey is the father.

RS: I keep running into this name: George Trefcer.

DR: He's on Kennedy Rd. He's still alive. He's still there, in fact, give him a call, He's very intelligent. He was on the board.

FB: I used to drive by his house.

JF: Wasn't he a college professor?

DR: I know he graduated from Boston College. Another apple grower was George Kennedy. He was also a supervisor of Sonoma County.

FB: I know that place. DR: A little jog in the road he's on the right.
Tom Marshall is just below him, he's another apple grower, he's got apples, his son is Eric.
John: He's farming our spot.

RS: If you will go through these (a list) and mark the ones prior to 1940 so we'll call the historical ones and then.

DR: I'll put 40 and earlier here. Furosho, in the 40s, Barlow 40s, (Griffith? 40s)
Oehlman yes, Hunt Bros.?

RS: Didn't the Hunt Bros start an early packing house?

DR: I'm surprised the Frei Bros. aren't in here.

RS: They should be. Let's add it.

DR: They had 500 acres on Frei Road. Of apples and they had a packing house too.

RS: We have an excellent picture of that but it was one that has been mounted and we can't use it. We're going to have to find out about that.

FB: 500 acres on Frei Road.

DR: Gallo bought it and its all a vineyard now. Lee Arnold is a grandson of this guy.

RS: Did you Dad start..

DR: He planted the orchard when he was 17 and he was born in 1899. In fact,
a lot of the land that was cleared, of course everybody burned wood at the turn of the century and there were mostly oaks, madrone, laurel or pepperwood, some willows and other varieties and you know Sebastopol was called Pine Grove. It was mostly full of Douglas Fir and that was logged but the hard woods a lot went to Santa Rosa, a lot went to San Francisco because everyone burned wood so they cleared the land woodwise and then I'm not gonna say everybody but a lot of the Hindus from India, actually grubbed the stumps out, it was a bit job. Then then went in with a big team, ten twelve horse what they call a breaking plow, big plow to get the roots out. So that's how a lot of this land was cleared here. And most of it was forested. The reason Burbank started growing apples here if trees grow here there's no reason fruit trees can't grow here. And they were not irrigated, because of the clay layer, and a lot of rain, relatively good soil. That's why he chose this area out here for his farm.

DR. You had to have a big team to get the roots out because especially Oaks if you did not get the roots out it would kill and apple tree because they have oak root fungus and that would kill an apple tree.

RS: So your Dad set that in order.

DR: So he planted that orchard and what they would do was plant on 24 ft. centers, 24 feet apart the row and the trees 24 feet apart. In between they planted berries, they could put two rows in between. That gave them a profitable commodity while the apple trees were growing and maturing. After 7 to 12 years they took the berries out and then you had your apples. We have one 32 feet apart, they put three rows of berries in.

RS: Why did they plant them that far apart?

DR: That was a contract, to plant 4-1/2 acres. Some guy said I'll plant them for so much well he did but he put them 32 feet apart. It worked all right because that orchard put out tremendous tonnage the roots could really expand, They didn't intermingle with each other, they were huge, some trees, each tree put out a ton.

RS: This was out on Gold Ridge Road where you are now?

DR: It was on the other side of the road. yeah.

FB: Was it exclusively Gravenstein?

DR: No it was Gravs, Jonathans, Red Delicious but not alot just enough to pollinize. And then there were Winter Banana there were an early blooming apple, they would graft a Winter Banana into the Gravenstein trees and that made a good pollinizer in fact they bloomed a bit earlier than the Gravs. So it was ready when the King Bloom came out. There were Golden Delicious, its not the best, Jonathan is good, Red Delicious, but another one that was good...(can't think of it) Granny Smiths now, but not available before but they bloom early.

RS: (asks about other growers names)

DR:Winklers, Frank Orchard, Warren Dutton yeah. His dad, O'Connell yes
Silveira yes, Frei Bros. yes, Pine Cone ranch? Don Hallberg, his brother Bob bought that and that was 350 acres. It went clear to Forestville School almost.
It's all vineyard now, But it was from Vine Hill Road clear to Forestville. Huge orchard.

RS: I went through Evelyn's cemetery book and found people mentioned as apple growers.

DR: I know this guy (who?), probably early 40s, you're talking about early dates here. (mentions names, Hillards?) James Kelly, John Tabor, Louie Guidino, George Menini yes,

RS: Le Ballister and Sanders (George)

DR: I was born on the ranch, I don't know. These two took over their dad's ranch, John, Senior) (what is last name?) I'll tell you if you want to find out something about the apple business I do not know there's a guy to see John Gregori, he's on Occidental Road. John Gregori Sr. Near the top near Green Hill Rd. he's on the left, probably a lot of grapes there now. A great guy I was on the board of two packing houses with him, I'm sure he would really help you.
Bill Braga, yea, Bollinger Bros. Bill Marshall definitely.

RS: So another thing I want to ask you how many are still growing apples?

DR: Eric is still doing.

RS: Let's do this and go back and put a check in front of them if they are still working.

DR: Bill Roberts he's passed on this would be Lloyds dad. Taniguichi, the dryer, but they were in the 40s, in fact my dad brought a lot of fruit there. There were two Taniguichis, one was up on Bodega Hy. the other side of Watertrough going up about a quarter mile on Watertrough, their planting grapes, there are just two kilns left from the dryer, brick. Tom Taniguichi and Jim

FB: Just to confirm something Rae mentioned the other day. Do you think it would have been Hallberg that would have managed that land that some of the Japanese had.

DR: I did know who was running the Taniguichi dryer. There was some exceptions to this internment camp. I'm not sure that the Taniguichis had to go.

FB: They did go, one was arrested.

DR: I guess they did go I'm trying to think who ran their dryers unless it might have been Hotle. They had one on their ranch too, up were Bob Burdo is now, there was a dryer there ran by Yamaguichi(?)

FB: Let me get this straight, the Japanese would primarily run the dryers.

DR: Well they did but they also had farms and Furosho's had a big packing house.
There could have been another packing house or two around too. Out by Graton that were small, but Furosho had the biggest one as far as the Japanese family here.

RS: Can I ask there are remnants of what looks like a dryer on Blackney Rd.

DR: There was one there. Garcia? I think that was Blackney's dryer.

FB: We out to go out and interview the guy on Kennedy.

DR: Yeah, George Trefcer. 7809 Kennedy Road. 823-4702

But that's George right there (in photo)

(End Tape 1)

(Begin Tape 2)

DR: In 1950, SAGU because most the growing in the packing house prior to Sebastopol Apple Growers United belonged to Sebastopol Apple Growers Union. Those people started the cannery and started the dryer because the fresh market was starting to go downhill because of Washington coming in with their controlled atmosphere storage or cold storage apples. It ruined the Graven stein market. There was still a market for fresh apples but not the volume that they had prior to the 50s. That's why they started the cannery downtown and the dryers. some of the dryers they took over from private owners and operated those three dryers.

FB: What did they do in the dryers.

DR: You're drying apples, making dehydrated apples. Like Marinucci or whatever name is down south, dried apple rings. From the dryer the peel and cores went to Speas. The vast majority of them in this area.

FB: Would the applesauce be a different part of that?

DR: The first one that started applesauce was Hallberg out in Graton. Then it became a pretty good market and that's why the people that brought apples to the packing houses said hey there's a market here,they got a loan and opened up this cannery downtown and it expanded then they started dryers because Hallberg had a dryer and making big money on dehydrated apples. At one time in this county there were 101 dryers or dehydrators. From Forestville to Cloverdale down to Hessel. They were small, two kilns, three kilns. Like that hop dryer that would be a three kiln dryer.(referring to a photo in a current museum exhibit)

Rae: Would you talk about the vinegar works, where did that fit in?

DR: Well that was Speas however Manzana still does that and Silveira O'Connell had a vinegar works too out on Occidental Road. It think its a winery now or tasting room.

Manzana has been around a long time, Barlow yes, 40s Vacu Dry no, Haven Best yes, Carl Oehlmann, his dad was called Dutch. His dad was W.A. Trigeiro family.
Frei Ranch.
Rae: Would you put a check on any that are still in apples now (referring to a list of apple industry names)

DR: Got a few but mostly grapes. Barlow and Manzana. Hotle. Still an orchard on Frank Peroni

(sp?) Bill Silva there're into grapes. On Sanders Road now half is grapes, some apples.
Taniguichi all grapes. Bill Starkey, took out for grapes.
Bollinger Bros. spilt. Bill Braga? nephew is running it.

Rae: You said there were two Taniguichi's. Rose Fuji was a Taniguichi and on Bloomfield Rood.

DR: There's part of a dryer there, they were on the corner where Bloomfield turns at Kennedy.

FB: There's still some apples there.

RS: Those were planted recently.

DR: Louie Guidino is running that. And its organic.

RS: But its not the Taniguichi?

DR: no, not the same Taniguichi, no

John Fore: Its all they can sell now. there is still 8 acres of apples there.

RS: I'm wondering if the family are still...?

DR: But the family don't take care of the ...?

John: Mitch does, there's 8 acres and 15 at (Mariolas?)

DR: Last year there wasn't much of a market for organic either. Its terrible because of the economy basically. People aren't going to pay extra if you can get an apple for 50 cents or get an apple for a dollar what are you going to buy. Even though the tonnage on organic, you don't get near the tonnage but if the economy is good people will pay extra for it. The Hurst's there still some apples there but not much, Ben.

RS: Did you see the Hurst house, remodeled. Saw it online it is amazing.
DR: They raised ten or twelve kids there you know, Darrell.

E.McClure asks, Don what are you doing with your apples now.

DR: A lot go to Martinelli sparkling cider and the Gravs go to Manzana. They want the Gravs because there is still a market for Graven stein applesauce at Lucky, Safeway, Trader Joes. Probably Whole Foods. As long as its organic or Graven stein, unsweetened a lot of it. All the other varieties go to Martinelli in Watsonville. No relation to Lee Martinelli of Sonoma County. Martinelli in Watsonville a number of years ago bought the Jolly Green Giant plant. Lee Martinelli, I think his son is George. He had Tony Bondi property, but that's all grapes now.

There are still some on Frei Road that is still orchard and still got some Romes on River Road opposite his winery. But I think his son George, is running that. Lee Martinelli is a nephew to Tony Bondi.(Don relates to accident with Tony Bondi, ran over by his tractor in the 1971)

Tony's sister married Martinelli in Forestville. Who has the canoes at the River, Trowbridge. Now Lee's sister is married to Trowbridge, somehow they split that up, somebody bought someone out.
Tom Marshall. I'll put Eric. He's running that too. 100 plus acres. On Watertrough Rd, the orchard on kind of a hill there to the north, that's part of Bob Burdo's place. the Clayton Ranch. When you come down Bodega Hy. and cross Atascadero Creek you see an orchard up the right, that's it. That was 40 acres. Back to Ungewitter's. George Menini, yes, there is some there.
I don't know about the Hurst Ranch, Eric brings some fruit there. I'll say probably. They sold quite a bit and there's some there and a lot of grapes.
Louis Guidino, he's organic but he wasn't here in the 40s.
Walker's, Warren Dutton.yeah. Lee Perry out of the apple business.